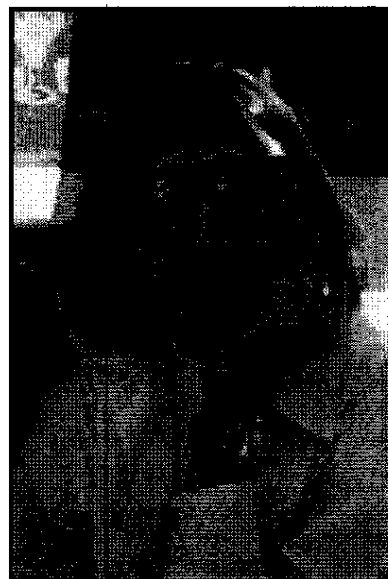




**Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz** is Professor of Ethnic and Women's Studies at California State University, Hayward. She is the author of *Roots of Resistance: Land; Tenure in New Mexico, The Great Sioux Nation and Indians of the Americas*. She is currently working on a historical novel based on the life of Belle Starr, the "Bandit Queen" from Oklahoma.

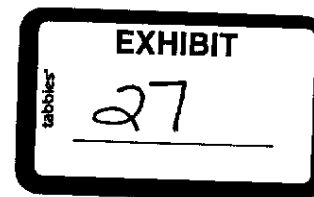


BUY CONTACT EXTRACTS PAPERS REVIEWS HOME LINKS

## Growing Up Okie: An Interview With Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz by Danny Postel

In *Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie* (New York 1997) Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz uses the compelling personal history of her family to tell the larger story of a neglected group, poor rural white Americans. Animating the book is the paradoxical story of how this group, once a breeding ground of radicalism, has become a bulwark of the American right. Grandchildren of Wobblies and Okies can now be found supporting the Christian Coalition, the Republican Party and even white supremacist militias. Her book makes clear that right-wing populism derives much of its power from the souring of radical hopes and the repression of genuinely egalitarian political movements. In addition, Dunbar-Ortiz grapples with how white racial identity offers consolation to the "foot soldiers of empire." Her book commends itself to all those interested in radical politics, the history of rural peoples, and the formation of racial identities. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz is Professor of Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies at California State University. Her books include *Roots of Resistance: Land Tenure in New Mexico* and *The Great Sioux Nation*. In this interview, conducted by Danny Postel for his radio program *Free Associations* and published in *left history* 6.1, Dunbar-Ortiz talks about her radical roots in a world of Wobblies, Okies, and the Klan.

**Postel:** Friends and enemies of *Free Associations* alike, it is time to surrender for an hour devoted to our weekly forum devoted to the exploration of ideas somewhere off the beaten path. I'm your host Danny Postel and this week on the show it's an interview with the author Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, who has got a brand new book *Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie*, published by Verso Books. Here is what Mexican Revolution scholar and Harvard University professor John Womack has to say about *Red Dirt*, "The sorrows and the courage of rich white Americans are nothing like the sorrows and the courage of poor white Americans, white trash who must daily struggle against the rule that shame is their duty. Nowhere has this



struggle been harder than in Roxie Dunbar's state and mine, Oklahoma. Over the last 100 odd years of settlement in Indian country, the Okie rich and their political stooges have made the misery of the poor there a popular cult. Some of the Okie poor have defied their doom as the foot soldiers of empire, told the truth to viscous power and the foulest condescension and bigotry, and felt the dignity of poor brown and black neighbors, a strong testimony to some fundamental good in humanity. Roxie's story of growing up poor and Okie is painfully faithful, brave, loving, and plainly beautiful. It would make her Wobbly grandpa very proud of her. It makes me proud to come from near where she comes from." Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz is a professor of ethnic studies and women's studies at California State University at Hayward. She is the author of a book called *Roots of Resistance: Land Tenure in New Mexico* and another one called *The Great Sioux Nations*. Roxanne, your fifth grade teacher told you, in your words, "to write your story so that a space man from Mars could understand it. Don't take anything for granted. Explain everything." Now I find that particularly interesting because in reading your book and in preparing for this interview, I figured that would be a good way to start things. Let's just start from scratch, no assumptions. Let's assume that people have no idea what an Okie is. Let's start right there: what is an Okie?

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** It's a derogatory term for those who went during the dust bowl to California without really anything and were farm labourers. They were rural people from Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri and Texas, but mainly from Oklahoma, about 80% from Oklahoma. And there were signs like "No Okies allowed," "No Okies or Dogs," "No Okies or Mexicans." You know, the usual thing. The kids were discriminated against. So that term is very sensitive. The best example I heard about it is from a California women. I was reading in the Central Valley, talking about the book. She wasn't an Okie but a middle-class woman, already in California. She's an elderly lady. She came home one day when she was a kid in the thirties and said she had just made a new friend and been to her house, that the girl was an Okie. Her father said, "you shouldn't associate with Okies but what kind of house was it?" It was a nice house, a brick house, and it was nice. Well he said, "then she wasn't an Okie but an Oklahoman. Okies are people without jobs who steel and are very dirty. So don't ever call her an Okie." So that's why I embrace this term. Especially in Oklahoma they like to pretend that the dustbowl never happened and that *The Grapes of Wrath* never got written or made into a movie. At least the powers-that-be there, the sort of social set. Poverty is considered the shame of those who are poor.

**Postel:** Now when you talk about the dust bowl, let's go ahead and talk from scratch there as well. The dust bowl I think in many people's minds evokes a region, a place rather than an historical experience. Go ahead and tell us what you mean by the dust bowl.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** Well, of course the dust bowl was mainly the Depression that coincided with the cycles of drought in that area. Today they have irrigation so even when there is drought, the crops still grow. But at that time it depended on rains. There was also an ecological disaster in the whole swaths of plains between the Mississippi rivers and the Rocky Mountains in the 19th century when they wiped out the buffalo. You know, the tens of millions of buffaloes. They also uprooted the buffalo grass and replanted alfalfa for their cattle. The roots, even when there were droughts, it didn't take the dirt away because these very long-rooted buffalo grass, taller than a person and the roots went down as far, so it didn't lift the whole earth up. But once it got transformed to short-rooted grasses, then those droughts would pick up the whole dirt, the top-soil. That kept getting worse and worse every period of drought until the devastating droughts of the early 1930s that went way up even into Saskatchewan. That hit parts of Oklahoma, but not all. What hit all of the farmers, whether or not they were experiencing the dust bowl and drought was the Depression, the foreclosure of mortgages, living in debt-bondage for so long. Share-croppers, farmers who would give out their land to be worked by share-

croppers or rentals, who would go broke. And then the sharecroppers had nothing to work, like my father. So multiply this a few million times and you have what we would call in any other country a famine. You know, basically a famine.



Sharecropper cabin: The author inside one of the many one-room sharecropper's cabins in rural Oklahoma where her six-member family lived when she was an infant. This one still stands as an abandoned relic to hard times.

**Postel:** Indeed, it seems that when you talk about the dust bowl and the Okies that migrated to places to California and other places on the West Coast, we're talking about something that amounts to what sounds to me like a diaspora. A diaspora of what you call "your people." You say that by 1950, 4 million people or nearly a quarter of all the people born in Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas or Missouri lived outside that region. This is a diasporic experience.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** It is and it is interesting to trace it because it's actually the kind of final chapter of a process that had been going on without much notice for several centuries of expansion, colonial expansion in North America. As Indian land were taken, an army would come in or basically the settlers would go in first, illegally usually. These were ancestors of my people, mainly Scots-Irish. They would go in, they would fight the Indians. They would take their land. The army would go in and clear the Indians out or drive them out in the case of the South-eastern Indians force them to go to Oklahoma territory. They would then move along the frontier. In every place where there was this kind of foot-hold that is gained by all these farmers, they would lose out through the cash economy, before and after cotton. It wasn't just cotton that did it, before that it was tobacco, indigo, rice and various cash crops. The big planters would push them out into the margins or into the mountains, the hill-billies and all. So then they would move on, hoping to get a foothold, maybe some of them would, maybe 1% and then the others would move on. So I call us, my people, the foot-soldiers of empire, but also the losers because they were the ones who moved on and never got a foothold in first of all Virginia, then they were in South-Central Tennessee. Then they moved on Missouri usually, and then into Oklahoma. Some of them were already moving to California even before the dust bowl and Depression. Oklahoma was open for settlement in 1889 during the run, when they broke down the Indian territories and divided the land and opened it up to homesteading. Some people didn't make it. It wasn't a lottery in that case, as it usually was with lotteries, some people got land and some people didn't. In the run, they made stakes of land and no one knew the land that well, so they didn't know where the water was. If you didn't get land with water, forget it. It's all underground water, the water you have to depend upon for wells.

**Postel:** Cadillac desert.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** Yes. They soon discovered oil. So some people had oil. It was a real boom but most people didn't so they either worked as farm labourers, share-croppers or tenant farmers or they moved on, especially a

lot of the younger men. They had been moving on to California so you have a good many pre-dust bowl migrants who basically did more or less o.k. Some of them did, some of them didn't. But it was a trickle effect, whole families moving. But then with the dust bowl and the Depression, people had relatives in California. All of these places beyond the horizon were considered the promised land. You know Missouri was considered the promised land, then Oklahoma, and California, Oregon, the North West and all.

**Postel:** Another diasporic theme of the promised land.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** Yes, and I think it's a theme of U.S. history of going into the wilderness and taming it. It's a very handy theme for colonialism, that you're really acting out God's will of a covenant. Your making a covenant with God to tame nature. This ideology was very strong in the religions that they formed, you know the evangelical religions. It created a certain sub-culture. I've also come to see it as a terrible cruelty to people who are basically peasants. This is what they were, always. They carried that with them to America. Land is what they came for. Land is what they wanted. They were different from say the merchants who came, other people who came who were already proletarianized. But these peasants who came, the Scots-Irish, the ones who had been planted in Ulster from Scotland when they were displaced by the English. Think of the hierarchy in the landed gentry. To own land was to be royalty. So you offer land to peasants, more and more land. This was like being a king. This Huey P. Long thing: "Every man a king." That's the definition of U.S. democracy, American democracy, every man can be a king. Yet of course only some make it but there's that possibility and the land then gives the status. I think this is how settler colonialism has worked all over the world whether it is South Africa or Zimbabwe or Algeria or East Timor today or whatever. That you offer land and the enticement is there and so poor peasants come and remove the already existing peasants. I see the Indians also as farming people tied to their land who were displaced.

**Postel:** Talking about the land Roxanne, the closing line of your introduction is "but there was the land and the love of the land." End of discussion. I found that a really interesting meditation because you've talked about the hardships, the almost nightmarish conditions of the existence of the sharecroppers, the peasants in this part of the country but there was the land after all and your love of the land. Can you talk about that?

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** Yeah, it's interesting to me in writing this book I came to try to conceptualize how we are, what land means in terms of our sustenance and subsistence not just land but all the resources that are on the land, you know water and all that. Just around, this, the place where we live. There have to be a certain number of people who are responsible for taking care of it. It doesn't have to be everyone. There are different roles in society. It seems to me when you commercialize the land completely and take away from that group that are sort of destined almost to be farmers. Not all of them. I did not get the gene myself. I did not like farming, I did not inherit this. Some people do, some people don't. But I've puzzled over it in my father and other people who do have it. Many are women. This is what want they want to do in this world. When they are left without purpose without tending the land, they become violent people, you know, without knowing why...

**Postel:** Dislocated.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** Dislocated. This of course ties in with why they were attracted to the socialist party and the I.W.W. in the early part of the century and became real rebels in the good sense. Today and for some years past you see them as rebels in the sense of being white supremacists, joining militias and so forth. But I think it comes down to the fact that there are people who have to farm, just like there are some people just like me who have to write. I mean it's not a choice, you just have to write and you have to keep at it. There are people who really, really need and have to work the land. That's what I call the true peasantry. I know there's one book that came out a couple of years ago where a man did a study. He came to the conclusion when fewer than 5% of the population are actually engaged in that, the social fabric collapses. He accounts for a lot of the social problems that we have now as we're down to less than 1%.

**Postel:** Roxanne, you say that your book *Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie* is really a life history, telling the story of your life and your family. You say it's a book "about growing up rural and poor in Oklahoma, a kind of historical study that would tell the story of a people and a place through one life, mine, and about our people who went to California." And so, of course, your family is central to the narrative and to the picture that you paint. Your father grew up a sharecropper but his father was a member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the Wobblies. Now those are terms that might not even be familiar to a lot of people these days. Why don't you go



ahead and give us a little bit of a sense of who the Wobblies were?

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** Well, it's no wonder that people don't know about it because it's not in the history textbooks. I'm a historian with a Ph.D. and the only way I know about it is from my being told the stories about my grandfather when I was growing up. Most of the people who formed the Industrial Workers of the World came out of the Socialist Party in 1903. They didn't set it up as splinter group but as a practical organizing device of one big union, everyone in the same union. The Socialist Party was a political party so they set the IWW up as a union but without division into crafts and trades because they saw that as pitting one set of workers against another. They wanted a living wage, same wage structure for all workers, and a people's banking system with no interest. They wanted to end foreign wars. They were pacifists even though they were anarchists and were not completely free of violent tendencies. They very much opposed wars, the state carrying on wars. They opposed the death penalty. They supported the equal rights of women before women had the right to vote and equality among the races.

**Postel:** You say early on in a chapter entitled "Red Diaper Baby?" you asked your father, "What did the Wobblies want?" and "No matter how many times he told me, I loved to hear his agenda of Wobbly dreams. Abolition of interests and profits, public ownership of everything, no military draft, no military, no police, the equality of women and all races. 'The O-B-U, One Big Union.' He would say and smile to himself, lost in memory."

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** Yes, and he would like to deny now anything to do with the Wobblies. There were 13,000 dues paying socialists in Oklahoma. It was the largest single grouping of socialists in the Socialist Party in America.

**Postel:** One doesn't normally associate Oklahoma as a hotbed of socialism.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** And a real trade unionists state. The actual constitution of Oklahoma is extremely progressive and you would never know it now because when the repression came during World War I it was focused on Oklahoma. There were Wobbly leaders getting deported, Big Bill Haywood skipping bail and going to the Soviet Union. Of course, the Wobbly activity within the Socialist Party was all before the Russian Revolution, so it can't be said this was foreign manipulation or treason. These were real homegrown people who had links all over the world but generally they were the leaders of these linkages with other workers around the world.

**Postel:** These were real Americans.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** And these were the real Americans, the down-home Americans. So the leaders in the Socialist Party met in Chicago and formed the IWW. Bill Haywood is the best known, but there was also William Moyer and George Pettibone. Of course, Mother Jones and Emma Goldman were there. They went ahead and voted for Eugene Debs, who was there and supported it. Well very soon, within four years, those leaders were on trial in Boise City for capital crimes.

**Postel:** This was sort of the western version of the Haymarket tragedy.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** Exactly. They were defended by Clarence Darrow, who got them off. My father was born during that trial and my grandfather named him after them: Moyer Haywood Pettibone Scarberry Dunbar. That's how my father got the name of all the Wobbly leaders on his birth certificate. My grandfather had joined the Socialist Party several years before that. Now his profile is interesting: my grandfather was a farmer. He had moved in from Missouri. He was already in the Socialist Party. Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma were real centers of socialism. He moved his family to this little town where I grew up in central Oklahoma. So they settled this little town and they were really like the town fathers and mothers. No one was rich but they had land and they had farms and they farmed. Then my grandfather when he was thirty-five years old went back to Missouri and did his medical degree in veterinary medicine.

**Postel:** And they had a big family, he had ten children.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** Eleven. Eventually eleven. He came back after three years of being gone. Meanwhile my grandmother was taking care of the farm and the older kids kept it going. He came back and was a highly respected veterinarian. He was school board president. The Wobblies took local power in almost every town in Oklahoma and throughout the whole western region of the United States. It's quite an extraordinary thing. They went for local power. The Socialist Party always ran people for larger offices, like Eugene Debs. He always got the larger share of the vote in Oklahoma than any other place, twenty to twenty-five per cent. It was really quite extraordinary because the IWW was also such a blatantly radical movement. It was radical in ways that were shameless. They would get accused of being traitors, the 1950s thing. The accusation of being unpatriotic came with their opposition to World War I. They weren't just pacifists. They called it a rich man's war and they were pretty much right. The war led to utter disasters after that, the Weimar Republic and then fascism. The Wobblies were horribly smashed. They were beaten up. The Klu Klux Klan was revived by the powers-that-be, although it had been moribund for years.

**Postel:** And this brings us directly into your family's story too because the Klu Klux Klan had a direct bearing that your family's politics and economic life.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** Before the Klan, there were the Palmer Raids. The Justice Department raided every Socialist office and IWW office and wrecked their printing presses, arrested leaders and deported anyone who was foreign-born. In west Oklahoma, the main people who had socialistic tendencies were farmers. They were Catholic and foreign-born Czechs, Poles and Germans. The way they framed the attack on the Socialists and Wobblies in Oklahoma was that they were foreigners, that they were working with the Kaiser, especially the Germans, and that they were traitors who couldn't be trusted. So whole mobs would go out beat them up. There's a scene in John Steinbeck's East of Eden of that happening in California. So the Klu Klux Klan, being anti-Catholic to begin with, made Catholics and the foreign-born the main target of their attack. Except for work crews of migrant cotton pickers, blacks weren't really allowed to settle in western Oklahoma by the powers-that-be. They had to be out of town by after dark. The Indians were so repressed and in tiny little enclaves. So the Klu Klux Klan focused on attacking the Catholics and foreign-born. They infiltrated the Masons in Oklahoma and they took over the Baptist church. Through these institutions in other places like Texas and Arkansas, the Klan took over the governorship. They actually came to power. And they did night-raiding, they beat my grandfather in front of my grandmother and the children until he was almost dead. He had to have a steel plate put in his head. My dad is convinced this killed my grandfather, although he lived ten more years. My grandfather was kicked by a horse he was doctoring and died soon after but if it had not been for that previous injury, he wouldn't have died as young as he did. He wasn't all that old.

**Postel:** So the Klan in a sense killed your grandfather.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** That's my dad's feeling. At least metaphorically the Klan drove them out. My grandmother was terrified. Here you have all these little kids to take care of and she wanted to get out of there. So my grandfather sold everything really cheap, real fast and just packed up what they could carry and they all moved down to the Rio Grande Valley in Texas.

**Postel:** Where you were born?

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** Well, I was born in San Antonio. But they went back and forth. My father was, and remains, attached to that place in Oklahoma. He's never wandered very far from it. It was his home, his town. I think he felt too that he had to vindicate his father as well. So he ran away from home at sixteen, went back up to Oklahoma where there were still some relatives. He worked as a regular line-rider, which people usually call cowboys. They string the barbed wire on the big ranches, very hard proletarian work. Indians, blacks, and poor whites and Mexicans did this work. And he became extremely good at rodeoing and everything else. He was a cowboy and quit school in the ninth grade. But he stayed there, he tried to stay as close as he could to Piedmon and was very attached to the place. He met my mother when he was working for her sister, who was married to a farmer. He was working for them as a farm labourer. My mother was fifteen and my father was seventeen. The next year they got married. That was in 1927. Things didn't look all that bad in 1927. They were young and poor. They were both working as farm labour. Then of course the Depression hit. They had their first child and another one came soon after. They lived in sod-huts and caves. They were homeless sometimes and lived in cars, mainly did cotton-picking. Then my dad started getting some sharecropping work. So they were moving around but it was all in this one county, where my brother and sister went to a different school two or three times a year. Little country schools. Me and my other brother weren't born for another eight years later, they had a kind of

second family in the late thirties so I didn't have to experience the worst of it but it was pretty much institutionalized by the time I came along. My dad was a sharecropper or rented. During that period they worked for the WPA. They almost starved. My father's big thing, he wanted to stay on the land, have land, to raise his own food, to have his own hogs and a milk cow, to feed his family because the worst thing you can think of is not to be able to at least eat. So he just refused to be uprooted from the land or to go to California or to move to the city. Part of it was also, he wanted to be there in Piedmont and to say I am here and I have the right to be here. The Dunbars have a right to be here.

**Postel:** Roxanne in chapter 5 of your book you talk about the world-view of the Okies. You say, "That our world-view is Manichean, not Buddhist. No yin and yang. There was no balance, just absolutes." And some of the absolutes you talk about really played themselves out in your home itself. I mean you had either communism or patriotism and you gravitated toward patriotism as a kid. You had your father's free-thinking cosmology versus your mother's sort of fundamentalist Baptism and you tended to gravitate towards your mother's Baptism. Or at least that was the direction you took. Can you talk about that?

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** Yeah, it's interesting to me because I grew up to be such a rebel. Yet I wanted nothing more than to be a good girl. You know, be a good Baptist, be a good school student. I think what really happened to me is what happens to a lot of children who receive lots of attention when you are the youngest, or suffer from certain conditions, often being sickly. I was an asthmatic, so I was almost an invalid. So several things came from that. One is that my father was trying to work out in his own mind what had happened and what his father did. He had a captive audience in me because with asthma you can listen but you can't talk because you don't have the breath to talk. I loved listening to his stories. He was just a great story-teller. He didn't tell these stories to the other kids and my mother wouldn't have been, she got sick of his story-telling. She was a good story-teller herself but hers were more fantasy stories than family stories. And he really focused on his father and told me over and over about the IWW. I suppose that put certain ideas in my mind when I was very young about equality, about communism. I mean, these were communist, socialist ideas he's putting in my mind. Even if you say these are bad ideas if you put it in the child's mind and say the beloved grandfather believed in this his entire life, it comes off as very positive. It's not something you don't want to be, so it was confusing to me when I started getting really patriotic and religious which of course coincided with the McCarthy era when my dad really stopped talking about these things. If I'd bring it up he'd say, he wouldn't talk about it. I didn't know if it was because I was getting a little bit older or just what. Although my grandfather's photograph and his I.W.W. book stayed there on the wall like a shrine.

**Postel:** So there was always an attachment on your father's part to the iconography of that era.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** Yeah, the honouring of his father. Well, what happened as I was drawn toward misfits. I was also extremely dark. I was literally the black sheep. That was my favorite childhood story, baa-baa-black sheep. I was attracted to misfits, it's very clear when I started writing this and the people I started writing about. One reviewer said it becomes a little surrealistic. Here's this bucolic countryside, you expect certain things. Instead you get teenage homosexuals and communists teachers. I was drawn to all these characters who would usually pass through for a short time, they didn't last long there or the threshing crews that would come through or the farm labourers who would come through. I kept being very attracted to the marginal people and to people who were probably just a little bit off and yet I thought of myself as extremely traditional. Not at all as a rebel, really until the sixties.

**Postel:** And even in the instance where you are watching the Army-McCarthy hearings on television as a kid you remember identifying with McCarthy and really admiring the young Roy Cohn and so forth.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** Yes, that's embarrassing now. I had to say that because that's still true. It makes me understand how people get paranoid. Now we talk about militias, believing in blue helicopters, and all these things. What appealed to us I think about McCarthy was not so much the anti-communism which was very remote from us but the anti-government sentiment because what they were investigating was the army and the government.

**Postel:** And there was a bit of this anti-government sentiment say as a residue from the Wobbly days.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** That's exactly it. Yes, that's all that was left over in some senses.



**Postel:** It was a different kind of anti-statism but it was there, that suspicion of centralized authority.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** Yeah, it plays very easily into the libertarian right-wing politics. Even today where that anti-statism sentiment can be manipulated but it can also always go in a more positive direction. The hopeful thing I think in my book is that there was a period of time when it went in another direction and where very independent, stubborn farmers became socialists. Then they were stomped out and repressed, kicked out of the country, imprisoned, killed even. They didn't really recover from that. I mean, there was the Southern Farm Tenant Labour Union, but they couldn't even get a foothold in Oklahoma. Basically no one really tried to organize farmers that much again. The California Communist Party I have some problems with, because they never did really have the kind of political education and literacy programs that the Wobblies and the earlier socialist party had had. So the communists were more like masses to strike, organized more like industrial strike.

**Postel:** Was this unwillingness to organize with the poor farmers derived from this white trash mentality, the belief that these people are really unorganizable?

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** I think so and I think it was very hard for those who were, and admirably so, anti-racists, which Communists party people were. I was talking to someone today about how the thing I most admire about the Communist Party in the United States. Because racism goes so deep and they focused on being anti-racists. They still had a lot of problems with it and bringing blacks into leadership. They were very conscious of it but I think they didn't quite know what to do with the racism of the whites and didn't understand it and didn't have enough organizers from the grass-roots to really deal with it. I use Woody Guthrie as an example. Woody Guthrie was anti-racist and not unlike many Oklahomans. He talks like us and is like us but he was out of that context in California. Then they recruit Leadbelly. The two of them were like book-ends but totally separate in organizing in some way. The only cross-over is like "Goodnight Irene" a Leadbelly song that got sung by the Weavers. Culturally there could be some cross-overs but this mainly took place in New York and with Communist cadre and not really interchange with the people themselves in actual work situations.

**Postel:** Now in terms of your family's poverty Roxanne, I find it really interesting what you say on page 18 where talk about 'the rage of your poverty.' The poor conditions your family lived in but this was covered over with pride for just being white and real Americans. Will you talk about that a little bit?

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** Yes, I think this idea of being the chosen ones, being the original settlers. It's hard to distance myself from it because sometimes I feel almost like these doctors who experiment with dangerous drugs with myself and I look at my own life, my own consciousness and try not to censor because I worked so hard at fighting racism consciously. I do think people's consciousness can change and it should. You shouldn't just be whatever you are, whatever you were formed to be. Yet I know it's almost like physical therapy or something where you have to compensate one thing for the other and think twice about it and be really, really conscious and it's a hard process. I don't think it takes so much a formal education as political consciousness and that can come in many different ways. I know plenty of people who get the education and still just have a slight veneer over their racism. But I think that the, the way in which I decided to deal with it is to look at other places, other people, other settler groups and I have really have learned a lot from the situation, from Afrikaner writers who are in the A.N.C. and all, from Andre Brink, and Coetzee and Breitenbach who are Afrikaners from that poor white Protestant background in South Africa. I think to talk about white supremacy and white skin privilege without breaking it down into old settler and immigrant is to not quite get the point. Because the racism of the old settler class is far broader than just anti-black. Blacks were the closest scapegoats. And it doesn't include interestingly enough as much the Indians and Mexicans as other kinds of racism do but the foreign born, the recent immigrants. At least in the south-west most Okies or what I call old-settler types would consider Mexicans, on the border anyway, Chicano-Southwest Mexicans just like themselves. Or the Indians, just the same. They're all poor, they're all the same.

**Postel:** And have real deep roots there with intermarriage, lot of intermarriage. The deep south-west American roots of those of the two cultures would provide more in common than say somebody born in Central Europe or Eastern Europe right?

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** And the extent that the Czechs and the Poles assimilated to the Old settler culture which in the process also assimilated them because where did that accordion come from, where did that music...



**Postel:** That Tex-Mex Conjunto music with the Polish and German accordian sound....

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** Of course it's like you know black music in the south. It absorbed to an original American genre. You know a certain context in which they insist on assimilation but once assimilated they become just like the others. I know Jack Womack, a professor at Harvard, whose from Oklahoma from a Czech background. His father was just as bigoted as my father even though even though he was Czech and Catholic. Exactly the same kind of language and view. Jack is another one, what do you do except stay as far away as possible. Go down and see your family and you can't quite deal with it. It's a very, very contradictory thing. But I think that there's more hope there in human reconciliation. Because I do think there are structural needs for racism in this country that it keeps getting perpetuated. The poor whites are the people who get blamed because they are the most blatant in language, even more than behaviour. But you have to remember that the Ku Klux Klan was formed by what would today be called fraternity boys, rich kids. It wasn't formed by a bunch of poor farmers.



Another cabin: Author at age 2 with siblings at another sharecropper cabin in Oklahoma.

**Postel:** And you make an interesting point about that in the book. You talk about the K.K.K. being bankrolled by rich wheat farmers, by industrialists and wealthy folks.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** Everyone knows who they are. In my little town where I grew up, there is a little farming community where my dad had sharecropped around, Piedmont. I went there in August and was hosted by a Piedmont historical society. So all the old-timers and their offspring were there, the whole town was there. They don't have a book store in that town but in Northwest Oklahoma City, there's a Barnes and Nobles. Apparently when there was the review of the book in the Daily Oklahoman, it was such a run on Barnes and Nobles that my book was outselling John Grisham.

**Postel:** How about that.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** At that particular Barnes and Nobles. Everyone had read the book, everyone. They seemed to have really loved it. I change a lot of names in it. It seemed to touch them where it was really true. The thing that was really nice was that in that room, about 100 people that night, you know I deal a lot with the Klan and the Catholics, in that room were former Klansmen and their offspring and of course there these German Catholics who were persecuted and their offspring for the first time. I never thought I'd see it happen in Oklahoma. An outspoken Irish Catholic, Roberta Whalen, said "this book is so wonderful I'm so glad someone finally wrote down what the Klan did to our families, how they terrorized us, how they made our lives miserable, and they should rot in hell as far as I'm concerned." And here are these former Klansmen sort of tucking their heads down in shame. This was something I thought I would

never see, that kind of open confrontation about those issues because basically people just sweep them under the rug, you don't talk about those things and everyone has to get along. So the people who were persecuted have to live with that bitterness. If nothing else I'm glad I did the book for that moment. It was really great.

**Postel:** What a homecoming. Now Roxanne, one of the things that I found interesting about the book is the different kinds of metamorphoses that you document. Metamorphosis in your own political consciousness that we just touched on briefly and the metamorphosis of your relationship with your father, the relationship of his political consciousness, the metamorphosis in your desire to maintain a relationship with your father and your daughter, for your daughter to have some sort relationship to your father. Now, let's back up a little bit and talk about something you touched on a minute ago which is the different ways that racism worked in Oklahoma. There was a sense there was a lot less racism directed say towards the American Indians than foreign settlers. What was your dad's relationship with Indians? There's a really interesting passage where you know he tells the long story of the Osage Indians. That must have struck you to hear your dad talk about the Osage Indians.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** The Osage Nation was of course the oil rich area that was left intact. It was, is the only Indian land in Oklahoma that wasn't broken down into homesteads. That was because they just moved in and bought the oil leases, or the royalties, not bought them but leased them. Oil leases from the tribe and just poured a lot of money in there. That meant that a small percentage of Osages were very rich and the rest were extremely poor like a third world country but there were Osages with cadillacs and with fantastic houses and everything. Well, anyway the white ranchers who leased ranch land on Osage land, it's a vast territory, prairie land, beautiful grazing land. They had huge ranches and they had hired hundreds of line workers to string barbed wire, fix the barbed wire, fix the fences, round up you know the stray cattle, bring them in, drive them in. They provided very little in the way, not to speak of low wages but housing. Basically the cowboys had to camp out, depending upon the ranchers, sometimes they had bunks. They were really bad on the Osage and mostly cowboys up there, they were a real mixed group but there was of course quite a few Indians, and Indians lived in the area. And my dad felt that they may not have survived without help from the Indians, especially the elderly Indian women who would cook them up some corn bread or cook a pot of something and felt sorry for these boys or if they brought their own boys, the Indian boys something, they brought it for the other people too. So he loved the generosity of the Indians, how they simply had no sense of money. Now people usually say "well, dumb Indians. They have no sense of money" but he acknowledged the generosity and if everyone could be like that you know it would be a much better world.

**Postel:** When you asked him what the Osage Indians were like, oh just about like any country folk excepting one thing, they'd give you the shirt off their back. You just mention you like something they'd give it to you. If they have any money they'd give that to you too. That's the way all Indians were.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** Yeah, he really admired that and of course he also admired the Indian cowboy's horse skills, his horsemanship. The things he admired in people, the blacks too, there were also black cowboys. You know, I think there's one abstraction where they'd say blacks and use epithets to say that or Czechs or anything else, they'd use things like

Pollacks, Bohunks, all these names. In reality those that worked together and worked together were absolute equals. So these abstract terms were for someone else somewhere. And I think that's something that's often misunderstood by more white liberals or maybe even black liberals. Actually I think blacks understand a lot better the class differences among whites, especially these old settler rural whites, than white liberals do. White liberals look down on white trash, they're lower than the low. There's no real political correctness imposed on completely trashing white trash. That's the one group left there's open season on.

**Postel:** This leads me to one of the most interesting episodes you talk about Roxanne which is the Green Corn Rebellion of 1917 and your family's perception and memory of that incident. Can you talk about the relevance of that and maybe walk us through the incident itself?

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** We'll its a really interesting extraordinary event. Of course the Wobblies were extremely popular all over Oklahoma but this was southeastern Oklahoma. It was a real stronghold of share croppers and tenant farmers and they were very mixed with the old Seminole nation that got broken down, so a lot Seminole Indians, Cree Indians, Muskogee Indians. This was an area where a lot of free black towns were established after the Civil War. And many had lost there land, there were a lot of poor blacks and poor whites. Their consciousness was certainly raised by the I.W.W., they had had some successful programs like a health care program they had set up, a co-operative they had set up. They set up quite a few co-operatives. They really had to fight the powers that be. They were really fighters, really enjoying it. There are quite a few interviews the W.P.A. did in the 1930s of some of those people that are fascinating. So when they started conscripting for World War One, after Wilson had got into the war, they knew that it would be their boys to go first. Rich men's sons wouldn't be going. They decided unanimously, all of the poor, literally all of the poor, they would not let their sons be conscripted. Not only that but they followed the IWW socialist credo of being opposed to the war in particular, not just war in general. They made it very clear they in fact were going to make a war, make a revolution. So they formed a rag-tag army. They all knew how to use a gun but they had very few and far between and very little ammunition. But they, most all of them had worked in the coal mines and had access to dynamite and they used dynamite quite a bit in Eastern Oklahoma to blow up power lines and stuff. So they worked it all out and blew up all the bridges and power lines around a certain periphery and created what we would now call a little liberated zone. Then they stopped and had a feast. Green Corn Rebellion is harvest, the corn harvest festival that's not on any particular date. It's whenever the corn turns green, its next stage is yellow but you can pick it and it will sun ripen. So what they were going to do is pick the corn green and take it in huge amounts and go all the way to Washington to overthrow the government. And along the way they were going to be joined, armies of landless farmers.

**Postel:** Kind of like, if I can't feast I don't want to be part of your revolution.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** Right, well this is how they would survive on their bellies. They would pick. They also believed that the railroad unions and the miners union, all the big unions, would just join in. It was sort of like Che Guevara in Boliva or the Zapatistas in Chiapas or the Emiliano Zapata in Morelos. What is really a shame in our history, even on the left, it's portrayed as some stupid bunch of bumpkins doing stupid things. Even a Socialist Party organizer in his autobiography, actually blames them for



the repression against the Socialist Party, the Palmer Raids and all, because they picked up arms. And I think that's just a re-writing of history and blaming the victim. Yes they did lose but so did Che in Bolivia. It's one thing I learned in Latin America is how you embrace your martyrs even if they were wrong. I did plenty of wrong-headed things in my early organizing efforts and could have done a lot worse. I think there's some people in Chicago who understand that but not to embrace that and say that's still taking a stand. The Indians have claimed the story and it is alive. For them it's one of many. They remind me of the Vietnamese, who say we fight from generation to generation, and it's the fight itself that keeps us going and makes us continue, so this is one of the many struggles, uprisings, that the Seminole Indians see as a part of what makes them a people of resistance and proud.

**Postel:** Now Roxanne, why didn't you want your daughter to meet your father and what was it that eventually changed your mind about that?

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** Well I guess it's complicated as all child/parent things are with all normal Oedipian or psychoanalytical things. Specifically I think I could have resolved most of those things without too much of problem. I think I was ashamed of being poor white. Even in the movement, I was proud of being from the working class, being proletariat, being blue collar, I was always very proud of my grandfather being a Wobbly. This had cachet in the left.

**Postel:** It carried a certain cultural capital.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** Yes, a certain cultural capital when we asked each other "what are you and what are you?" Our little levels of status depending on it, had we had been arrested on a shop.

**Postel:** Certainly more romantic than being from an affluent suburb, let's say.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** Exactly, we could sort of one up each other. I didn't see it consciously at that time and it was part of who I was. And course I had myself worked in factories, had to work and did go on to college. But I edited my background in terms of all the other things, the old settler class. The racism I so much opposed myself and my father's such a bigot. The period of time of the sixties and especially late 1960s and early 70s when I was my most militant he was supporting George Wallace. It's one thing to support Hubert Humphrey or something but I was dealing with a father who supported George Wallace. My dad stingy and poor was sending money to George Wallace, campaign contributions. So, we simply could not have a discussion. Not only that, if he had been willing to just leave it alone, we'd just talk about, look through the photo albums and talk about the past. He wanted me to think the same as him. He saw it as his duty as most fundamentalist type people. Of course I did too as a socialist. They had to think like I do. They can't just leave it alone... :

**Postel:** Clashing of two fundamentalisms here.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** I'm sure I got my rigid dogmatism straight from him.

**Postel:** So you were afraid of your daughter being exposed to this.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** It was my little thing. You will never get to meet my little daughter so long as you are supporting George Wallace, basically. You got to change. And of course, he's unchangeable. Well, I'd go back and see him and would almost always end in a fight. I would think about taking my daughter back. Well, you see my daughter was really raised by her father and his family. I'd lost custody of her but I did see her. I was able to see her and we're very, very close now. It's not like I had her with me and I hid her in motel or something when we went there. It would have taken some trouble to take her there. And then I was kind of ashamed that her father's family were much better off. Something she could be proud of. And I didn't want her to see how my dad lived in very, very poor conditions, which he still does. I mean here's a working class room we're in now, but it's all neat and clean and orderly and everything. My dad, as I said, is like living in a camp, to live with him. He cannot see why any kind of nicety, including curtains or anything else, should be necessary to live.

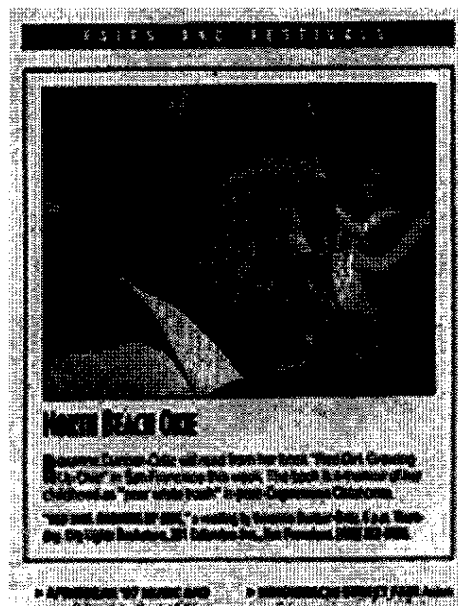
**Postel:** Well, we're talking about somebody who had himself grown up in some of the poorest conditions of all. When your father had gone back to Texas after he was taking care of a women's shop and he had lost the shop couldn't pay his rent. He was evicted. They went back to Texas to live with his brother, who himself was poor but had him out in a shack in the back. So this is where you spent some of your childhood. It was a cooker, there was no ventilation. We're talking about some one who had lived through some of the harshest poverty imaginable.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** Of course he had also lived camping out for about four years before he got married as a cowboy. So he liked not having a lot of objects. I was like that. For years I wouldn't buy a bed. To me as a leftist, this was bourgeois, to own a bed, to own any furniture.

**Postel:** I can identify with that.

**Dunbar-Ortiz:** I thought I was getting it from my leftist politics, but I think I just took after my dad. I liked the sparseness and the freedom of being able to carry everything on your back or in my volkswagen bug. There was that but also part of it is choice and part of it is choice now. I think he always felt that if you softened up too much, if you had too much luxury or too much joy or pleasure that it would break down your ability to survive. He's probably right. One thing I understand about poverty is how in some ways it hardens people. I hate romanticizing poverty because I think it can make you as cold as can be. That's why people from that kind of background make very good soldiers, can kill without a bit of consciousness because if you're in a survival situation, this is what you have to do. And it's a tragedy because it can go awry. You look at the profile of the kind of person who gets up on the tower and shoots all the people, that is a profile of a poor white male between the age of 25 and 35.

**Postel:** Well that does the trick for Free Associations this week friends and that also concludes my interview with author Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz about her new book *Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie*.



## Amazon.com Interview:

**Q:** How did you begin writing? Did you intend to become an author, or do you have a specific reason or reasons for writing each book?

**RD-O:** I have written and thought of myself as a writer as long as I can remember. Although my family was extremely poor and rural and we had few books, my mother and father were both great storytellers, and later when I was in school, my mother started writing stories and publishing them in the weekly newspapers of nearby rural towns. I was an asthmatic and often at home alone with her on school days. It seemed natural that after doing the many housekeeping and farming chores that she would sit down and write for several hours. I chose to become a scholarly writer and studied history, completed the Ph.D. and have published several books and articles on the history of colonialism in the western hemisphere. My just published, "Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie," is a departure in that it is a memoir although I call it "life history," using my own life story and that of my family and community to tell the history of rural North America.

**Q:** What authors do you like to read? What book or books have had a strong influence on you or your writing?

**RD-O:** I strongly favor books with poor and working class themes--Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo, Knut Hansum, William Faulkner, Eudora Weldy, and more recently the work of Dorothy Allison and Jim Grimsley. I am also drawn to history and stories of marginal individuals and peoples and dysfunctional families, such as a lot of the work of the nineteenth century Russian writers, Tomas Mann, D.H. Lawrence, Jose Camilo Cela. I'm now reading the three new biographies of Ernesto Che Guevara (Jon Lee Anderson, Jorge Castaneda, Paco Ignacio Taibo 2nd) and J. Anthony Lukas's "Big Trouble," a historical study of the Industrial Workers of the World during the first two decades of this century. My grandfather was a Wobbly and my father is named after the Wobbly leaders (Moyer, Haywood, Pettibone, who were on trial in Boise during the summer of 1907 when he was born. I read a great deal and always have and have been influenced profoundly both in my life and thinking as well as my writing. During the past decade, working on the memoir, "Red Dirt," and attempting to tell history through a family story, I have been most influenced by the nonfiction work of Richard Slotkin (especially "Gunfighter Nation") and by the fiction of Afrikaner South African writers, especially Andre Brink, and by the bounty of fine writing from Asia, especially Salmon Rushdie.

**Q:** Could you describe the mundane details of writing: How many hours a day do you devote to writing? Do you write a draft on paper or at a keyboard (typewriter or computer)? Do you have a favorite location or time of day (or night) for writing? What do you do to avoid--or seek!--distractions?

**RD-O:** I write best in my own study during the early hours of the morning. The rest of the time I can do editing and revision, but the original writing pretty much takes place at my desk. I write all first drafts by hand on a lined legal pad, then revise on the computer. To write and even to edit and revise, I have to stay home, so when I travel I don't even try to write, except letters and some in a notebook.



**Q:** Do you meet your readers at book signings, conventions, or similar events? Do you interact with your readers electronically through e-mail or other online forums?

**RD-O:** I love to meet my readers in any setting or through mail and telephone. Lately, I have been doing a lot of readings and signings and really enjoy it, although I haven't been getting much writing done. I am a university teacher and love interaction with people which involves the intellect, imagination, and emotions. I'm not a lecturing kind of teacher, rather more interactive.

**Q:** When and how did you get started on the Net? Do you read any newsgroups such as rec.arts.books and rec.arts.sf.written, mailing lists, or other on-line forums? Do you use the Net for research—or is it just another time sink? Are you able to communicate with other writers or people you work with over the Net?

**RD-O:** I've been on the net for several years now, although I use it mainly for email and to read the daily news and reviews. I really love not having to subscribe to so many magazines I never finish reading.



## OUTLAW WOMAN

A DELOIT OF THE KKK YEARS, 1940-1975

BUY  
A  
COPY

CONTACT  
THE  
AUTHOR

EXTRACTS

MORE  
REVIEWS

PAPERS

HOME  
PAGE

LINKS